

INTERGROUP CONFLICT  
THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUST IN THE MANAGEMENT OF BIAS

Article

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By

Lieutenant Pat Sprecco  
El Cajon Police Department

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Lt. Pat Sprecco

Law enforcement is unique. It is a traditionally white male profession that has become increasingly more diverse. It is responsible for policing in an unbiased manner using human resources that are uniquely biased. It is important to manage individual and institutional bias and intergroup conflict. Change is necessary to develop organizational cultures of understanding, trust, and honest, open communication. As a highly visible diverse group uniquely positioned to influence communities, law enforcement's responsibility is to demonstrate a model of successful organizational development worthy of public trust.

The elimination of negative bias can't be wished into organizational policy and philosophy. In her book, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future, The Paradox of Race*, Patricia Williams writes on the problems associated with trying to wish conflicts away:

...someone has just announced in no uncertain terms that he or she hates you because you're dark, let's say, or Catholic or a woman or the wrong height, and the panicked authority figures try to patch things up by reassuring you that race or gender or stature or your heartfelt religion doesn't matter... While I do want to underscore that I embrace color-blindness as a legitimate hope for the future, I worry that we tend to enshrine the notion with a kind of utopianism whose naivete will ensure its elusiveness... I don't think about color, therefore your problems don't exist. If only it were so easy."<sup>1</sup>

People are often more comfortable with others similar to themselves. Integration and diversification that occur not by choice often create conflict. It is normal for people to associate with those of similar race and ethnicity, yet people are often reluctant to openly discuss these

preferences out of fear of how their opinions will be viewed. One futures forecast sees this trend continuing. In the magazine entitled, “The Cyber Future, 93 Ways Our Lives Will Change by the Year 2025,” Edward Cornish forecasts that communities will become increasingly more segregated by choice.

Is it okay to value similarities yet appreciate differences? Fear can hinder the ability of people to do so. There is almost a taboo on frank discussion. Thomas Sander, executive director of Harvard University’s Saguaro Seminar, Civic Engagement in America, explains this as the absence of “social capital.”<sup>2</sup> Social capital is the presence and involvement in formal and informal socializing, getting to know one another, trusting people. It is becoming engaged in the activities and culture of the organization. In a community or organization where there is high level of social capital, a climate of trust exists.

A May 2000 research paper by the National Institute of Justice on police attitudes toward the abuse of authority found significant and substantial differences between the views of black officers and those of white and other minority officers.<sup>3</sup> “There is a racial divide between whites and blacks in American society – a divide so pronounced that even the apparently strong culture of policing does not transcend it.”<sup>4</sup>

In a 2001 study financed by the National Institute of Justice, it was determined that white officers used more force against black arrestees than did black officers regardless of the level of resistance offered.<sup>5</sup> A former Prince George County police officer of 24 years and now Executive Director of the National Black Police Officers Association, Ronald Hampton, responded to the report. He remarked that new officers going through the academy today are still exposed to a police culture that has its history rooted in violence toward the minority community.

In 1976 the Prince George Police Department was nearly all, white while 25% of the community was black, and only 4% of the officers were black. Since then the department has changed and today has 52% white officers and 41% black. Black officers make up 44% of the command staff, which includes positions of captain or higher.

What effect has the change had on the organizational culture and on the ability of officers of different cultures to learn from one another? The former president of the Prince George Black Police Officers Association felt the problem between white officers and black arrestees was one of fear. Whites, he felt, lack the cultural awareness and understanding of black culture. “That can be the driving force: the fear factor.”<sup>6</sup>

Consider the Washington D.C. Police Department, which has over 3600 officers: 70% black, 26.5% White and 5% Latino. Here, there is an overwhelming majority of black officers who should be in a position to create the organizational culture. In a 1999 article in Latino USA, a radio journal of news and culture, Michelle Garcia discussed the organizational culture of the D.C. police. She reports that in 1998 the D.C. Hispanic Police Officers Association filed a complaint with the Justice Department charging the D.C. Police with discrimination and fostering a hostile work environment.<sup>7</sup> Remember in D.C., the Latino police officers are the minority. How is it that a traditionally underrepresented minority in law enforcement, upon becoming the majority, would now be accused of profiling and discrimination by both the Hispanic community and the Hispanic members of their own organization? According to Ron Hampton, Executive Director of the Black Police Officers Association:

...there is an expectation that people of color – black and brown – women on the police force would also, at least to some degree, understand some of the problems as a result of having experienced them themselves. But that’s not the case, because the culture and the value system of the institution that these individuals work for has been one still now that operates from a white male dominance.<sup>8</sup>

What does that mean? That even though in the D.C. Police Department, where there is a reversal of the traditional norm, the black majority is so influenced by the preexisting culture and established values of white men, they are incapable of acting otherwise? Or to quote Michelle Garcia, “We often assume that if you are a member of a minority group, you automatically have some sensitivity to the circumstances of others. The majority of D.C.’s police force is African American, but does this make a difference?”<sup>9</sup>

Hampton sees the culture as white male dominance where minority officers are powerless to change even when they become the majority. Hampton and Garcia support the belief that the mere recruitment of traditional minorities to law enforcement will not change the ability to understand others. Bringing diversity to an organization without a plan to understand and manage it only creates conflict.

It is important in the management of conflict to develop an environment or climate of organizational trust. We must confront individual and institutional biases and engage in frank and honest discussion. It is important to manage bias, not suppress it. Suppression of feelings of resentment, bias, and conflict, in the interest of conflict avoidance actually exacerbates the issue. Bias and misunderstanding can’t be willed away by policy and procedure. Policy can be written to control acted out bias, but enough policy cannot be written to control how people feel and think. What is needed is a clearly defined vision and mission. Organizational values can be developed, espoused, and exemplified, so that differences and cultural awareness can be leveraged into a keener understanding of what makes people who they are.

A philosophy of trust is accomplished one contact at a time, one decision at a time, one confrontation at a time. The concept of an emotional bank account addresses the importance of continually making deposits into this account, doing the right things, and creating trust.<sup>10</sup>

Policy is often black and white. Easily read and understood. Philosophy is a little more difficult in that it is more remarkable for what is not written yet still clearly understood. Dennis Prager hosts a nationally syndicated daily radio talk show. He remarked once that it is interesting how much of our life is philosophy versus how little is science. Development of an adherence to an organizational philosophy rooted in trust and respect is a deposit into the emotional bank account.

Another concept in conflict management is the ability of organizations to provide for workplace justice. In a paper titled “Workplace Justice, Zero Tolerance and Zero Barriers,” Mary Rowe and Corinne Bendersky of MIT Cambridge, Massachusetts, the authors explain that for employers to insist on fair and courteous service of customers, they must first ensure that a fair and civil culture exists within the organization. In a high trust culture, employees feel responsible for taking effective, timely action on their own when they perceive a problem. They discussed win-lose (formal justice) and win-win (fairness and problem solving) strategies for problem solving. Their paper reports that the more organizations work to implement true zero tolerance policies and formal investigations on unacceptable behavior, the less likely people were willing to discuss situations when they perceive a problem.<sup>11</sup>

People want to resolve conflict informally in a high trust culture. It is only when that trust does not exist or has been betrayed that informal resolution is no longer an option. Federal mandates and hiring quotas don’t come about because of one mistake in otherwise healthy

organizations. They occur as a result of many mistakes and fear that the organization is incapable of appropriately resolving conflict. Without trust, sometimes rules are all that is left.

People are not the same and problems occur when organizations make faulty cultural assumptions, believing that police officers from different cultures share the same feelings on issues. Does the creation of minority employee groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation eliminate or exacerbate conflict? Yes, but they exist and reasons abound for their existence. In an opinion piece written in the PORAC Law Enforcement News, Ken Lutz remarks that these associations often come about "...because of the existence of inequality."<sup>12</sup>

Cultural awareness education is and will become increasingly more important as organizations and communities diversify. This type of education must be introductory in the academy and continue throughout an employee's career. It should be formal and informal and integrated into an organization philosophy of looking for differences in order to seek understanding. Awareness education does not mean that persons exposed to it are expected to agree with or accept another's opinion or position on a particular issue. It is intended to expose individuals in the organization to differences in opinion and perspective. It is intended to allow for a better understanding of why these opinions and perceptions are held. It can develop necessary cultural competencies.

Awareness education differs from the diversity training given in the 60's and 70's. Cultural diversity training, while well-intentioned, attempted to mandate understanding. Preaching, blaming or scolding hasn't and won't work. An organization cannot change anyone's opinion on anything. It can create an environment, however, in which members of the organization feel free to discuss issues and differences. Individuals then must decide on their own if there is value in the change and if they will accept the proposal.

An appropriate organizational vision statement is very helpful in this regard. But rather than simply saying we value or celebrate diversity, explain what it means. Valuing diversity may mean that the organization places value on the people as individuals who make up the organization, and will ensure their well being will be looked after. This is represented in an organization where trust and honest communication is highly valued

An organization should identify a unit, group, or person tasked with the responsibility of culture scanning. A more formal approach would be the development of an ombudsman position responsible for taking the emotional pulse of the organization. Law enforcement puts great emphasis on perishable skills relating to tactical ability yet routinely neglects its internal health. An ombudsman would work with an organization's employee assistance program acting as an internal barometer to identify and forecast issues needing attention. The ombudsman would watch, read, listen, and talk with members to determine what the current issues are. Depending upon the size of the organization, this task might rightly fall to the first line supervisors or managers. With appropriate training, this group would ensure that issues are brought to the table for quick, open, and frank discussions. Left alone, intergroup conflict has a negative impact on whatever level of social capital exists. Identified and discussed, conflict can be the basis for increased understanding.

Organizations can rely on strengths inherent to good leadership to develop a culture of trust. In a text addressing multicultural law enforcement, an assertion is made that "good leaders not only acknowledge their own ethnocentrism, but also understand the cultural values and biases of the people with whom they work."<sup>13</sup> This ability shows the leaders awareness of their own bias, and allows for the organization to be able to openly discuss similar issues further developing a high trust environment.

Cultural tradition is an external environmental threat and obstacle in successfully managing conflict, brought about by the diversification of law enforcement. White males are still a cultural norm in law enforcement. What is surprising is that in some organizations where traditional minorities are now the majority, they claim to still be under the influence of, and prisoner to, the norm.

Second, but of no less importance, is a culture's steadfast resistance to change. In the case of diversification, law enforcement argues for change while maintaining the status quo. Or as appropriately stated, "...there is difficulty in innovation in an organization that simultaneously compels its members to adhere to all the proscriptions of a large bureaucratic structure."<sup>14</sup> A paper on police organizational culture describes how the culture is perpetuated. Once people are hired and brought together "police show an unusually high degree of occupational solidarity."<sup>15</sup> The difficulty occurs during the selection process. "The selection process is the beginning of the police cultural assimilation. Persons who can demonstrate characteristics and traits like those possessed by the officers already on the force stand a greater chance of being hired."<sup>16</sup>

Law enforcement leadership has an important role in the management of intergroup conflict, as change agents. Management must work toward the development of a culture that is open, willing to share, and trusting. Members want this type of environment and resort to individual preferences when there is a void in organizational principle and values. Leadership's inability to achieve such a culture means more and much more of existing problems.

Diversity accomplished without understanding and vision is similar to red and black ants being thrown together into the same Tupperware container by a grade school child. The accomplishment is remarkable for its ease of implementation and also for its disastrous effect. The change program to diversify the ant colony was quick and easy and short-lived. Change in

organizations requires a better plan. Successful diversity requires the assurance that group members have or are afforded the opportunity to develop the cultural competence necessary to understand others in the organization. Assumptions should not be made on what people think and feel. Change occurs when individuals are put into a “new organizational context.”<sup>17</sup>

Experiences can lead to the desired change, but only if people survive them.

Law enforcement must look to better understand and prepare for the change diversity creates in organizations and to develop proactive strategies to manage the resultant conflict. It will, of course, be necessary to establish processes that allow for change implementation, analysis, feedback, and subsequent adjustments. Apart from process will be the necessity of creating a climate or environment that allows for successful change by promoting trust.

Intergroup conflict is usually not the result of a process or procedure failure, it is really symptomatic of a systems failure. It is the failure to nurture the desired organizational culture, the failure to continually analyze the organizations outcomes to ensure congruence. Is law enforcement able to create an organization appropriately representative of the community it serves while demonstrating a model of successful diversity?

Viktor Frankl, a survivor of the Nazi death camps said “Man is capable of changing the world for the better if possible, and of changing himself for the better if necessary. Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized depends on decisions but not on conditions.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patricia J. Williams, Seeing a Color-Blind Future, The Paradox of Race, Noonday Press, New York, 1997, P4.

<sup>2</sup> Interview of Thomas Sander by Blake Harris Editor, “Reinventing Civil Society”, Government Technology, November 2001, P20.

<sup>3</sup> David Weisburd and Rosann Greenspan, “Police Attitudes Toward Abuse of Authority”, National Institute of Justice Research in Brief, May 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. P8.

<sup>5</sup> “Study Finds Racial Bias by Police in Prince George’s”, Craig Whitlock and David Fallis, Washingtonpost.com 4 November 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> “Police and Latinos”, Interview of Chief Charles Ramsey by Michelle Garcia, Latino USA – The Radio Journal of News and Culture, latinousa.org, 1999.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen R. Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1989, P188-190.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Rowe and Corinne Bendersky, MIT Cambridge, Workplace Justice, Zero Tolerance and Zero Barriers, Cornell University Press, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> “Change and Diversity Equals Tolerance”, Ken Lutz, COPOR Committee, PORAC Law Enforcement News, January 2002, P21.

<sup>13</sup> Robert M. Shusta, Deena R. Levine, Phillip R. Harris, Herbert Z. Wong, Multicultural Law Enforcement, Prentice Hall, New Jersey, 2002, P69.

<sup>14</sup> Diane Vaughan, The Challenger Launch Decision, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, P192-193.

<sup>15</sup> “Police Organizational Culture: Using Ingrained Values to Build Positive Organizational Improvement”, Stephen J. Harrison, P3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. P7.

<sup>17</sup> “Why Change Programs Don’t Produce Change”, Michael Beer, Russell A. Eisenstat, Bert Spector, 21 March 2002, Session 6 Handout, Command College Class 33. P267.

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<sup>18</sup> Viktor E. Frankl, Mans Search for Meaning, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1984, P133, 135.

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